

**Center for Modern Greek Studies**  
**Greek American Oral History Project**  
**Transcription**

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**Tape:** A16

**Subject:** James Lagiss Sr. (Lagiss)  
**Interviewer:** Peter Haikalis (I)  
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**Translator/Editor:** Nicole Fernandez

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**I:** Peter Haikalis is conducting an oral history interview of James, a.k.a. Jim, Lagiss who uh On October 17 about two o'clock in the afternoon. Jim, I'm glad you consented to be recorded today. And I was wondering if you could start off by just telling us about when and where you were born, I think that's the first question.

**Lagiss:** I was born in Port Chicago, California. In those days it was called Bay Point, California. Born in 1918 and grew up there in Port Chicago. Went to high school – Mt. Diablo High School in Concord. We used to get on an electric train and go to school in the morning and then in the afternoon, we'd take the train back – all of the children from Port Chicago and that's where I finished my high school.

**I:** Was that like a streetcar you went on?

**Lagiss:** It was an electric car – Sacramento Railroad, it was called at that time. And eventually, of course, they – there's no more trains that go there.

**I:** How long did it take you to go on the train?

**Lagiss:** From Port Chicago to Concord was about 25 minutes – 30 minutes.

**I:** And you said the name of the town changed from Bay Point to Port Chicago?

**Lagiss:** Yes. They had some people – mostly there was three Greek families and three or four Italian families and the rest were all Swedes. Mostly Swedes, a few Finns and we used to kid the Swedish kids and we'd ask them how come your parents say "Svede" instead of "Swede"? So, at any rate, small town- had a little grammar school and my older brother was in the second grade and when I started school, at five years of age and I couldn't speak a word of English. And I sat next to my brother and he would explain to me what they said and of course, being young, pretty soon, you caught on and you understood the English language. And went through grammar school, there were tough years – Depression and uh, started high school-

**I:** What year did you start high school?

**Lagiss:** Pardon?

**I:** What year did you start high school?

**Lagiss:** I don't remember exactly uh it was, uh it was back in the '30s.

**I:** '31 or so?

**Lagiss:** '32, right during the heart of the Depression.

**I:** Let's go back for a second. Tell me about your parents. Where did they come from?

**Lagiss:** My parents came from a little village, they called it Kakouri. And Kakouri was a – near the town of Tripoli – a very small village. Virginia and I have both gone there and I might mention that Virginia went first with my two daughters and they got off of the –

they got up there on a donkey. The bus stopped below them, they climbed up the hill, got on the donkeys, and got up there and that was first. And then, they took my mother later on and they had built a road and a bus went up. So, giagia got up to the little town of Kakouri and there was the ladies with the little water jugs and barrels – she went to the village fountain there and got the water to drink. So anyway, my mother went to the little house where she was born.

**I:** How many years later was that after she had-

**Lagiss:** Oh that was fifty years at least-

**I:** From the time she first came from the United States?

**Lagiss:** Right and in those days they had dirt floors and strange as it may seem, that little house still had the dirt floor – it was spotlessly clean and they through the handmade rugs on the floor; and chickens all the way around, goats and my mother tended the sheep – she was an orphan and she tended the sheep.

**I:** Both her parents had died?

**Lagiss:** Her, uh, her, uh, mother died first. And so, she tended the sheep and my mother could whistle like a man does through her teeth and you could hear her a mile away. She whistled for the dogs to bring the sheep back.

**I:** Now did your mother live with her grandparents in the village in Kakouri?

**Lagiss:** Yep-

**I:** And did she know your dad there?

**Lagiss:** They were- that's right- they were neighbors and uh, my dad came- my dad's sister, older sister came to Los Angeles. There was a large Greek community down there-

**I:** Do you remember about what time that was – how many years ago?

**Lagiss:** That was in the, that was, I think, slightly before the war.

**I:** First World War.

**Lagiss:** Right. So my dad went down to LA where his sister was.

**I:** But they didn't come together? They came separately?

**Lagiss:** No, he sent for her later. And so he went down there and he didn't like Los Angeles. So he heard that there was a lot of work in the Bay Area so they got on a train. And I don't remember just how far the train came, but they made two or three switches and came into the little town of Port Chicago and in those times, it was called Bay Point. And so he got there and there was a Greek family there and he knew of them and so, he got a job, a first job.

**I:** So he got off the train with the purpose of going to see them?

**Lagiss:** He got off the train, he knew there was some Greek people there.

**I:** They weren't expecting him to come.

**Lagiss:** No, so anyway, he and my nono, he came a few weeks later and they went down the valley, Sacramento Valley, down around Stockton and so forth. And their first job was cutting asparagus. And asparagus – you bend over and you have a long knife with a like a chisel and you dig them up and you wrap the asparagus in little bundles. And I understand they still do it the same way. He got – they each got a dollar a day.

**I:** For doing that.

**Lagiss:** For doing that. And there was a little old shack of a house and five or six Greek guys lived there and did their own cooking and everything. And there was chicken – there was a lot of rabbits in those days. And my father bought an old single barrel shotgun and they start shooting rabbits. And there was so many rabbits that eventually, ten or fifteen years after that, they had multiplied and they had rabbit drives where 30-40-50 men would walk through a field and every rabbit that got up, they shot them because they destroyed the farmers' crops, you see. And so that was a big event each year to go on a rabbit hunt.

**I:** And then did he go back to Port Chicago to settle finally then?

**Lagiss:** Then after they left there, they heard there was a- they worked on the railroad for a while and then they heard there was a lumber mill in Port Chicago and it just started.

**I:** When you say "they" you mean your dad and this man who became your nono?

**Lagiss:** Right-

**I:** And was he any relation to your father?

**Lagiss:** No, they came from the same village. And so they moved to Bay Point and my godfather was pretty handy and they built a little four room house- a little kitchen- there was no living room in those days and the kitchen was a pretty good size – wood stove and the bedrooms. And they made their own wine each year – that was the big event. And they decided, I remember as a little boy, they couldn't buy ouzo anyplace and they didn't like the American whiskey. There was whiskey but it was awful stuff in those days. So they built a still out of copper and they made their own ouzo and what they did was they had the pure liquor that came out and then they went and got the distilled water and they had a little barometer that told them how much alcohol was in the ouzo and they had it down - the ouzo was well below- our bourbon now is- what 80% or something like that- and in those days, the ouzo was down around 30%.

**I:** Oh, it wasn't very strong.

**Lagiss:** Yes. And then they made raki. And I don't remember, to be honest with you Peter, what the difference between ouzo and raki was. I remember them saying raki was more pure and a little more stronger. So-

**I:** I don't think it had such a strong taste of anise like ouzo does.

**Lagiss:** That's right.

**I:** So your dad started to get himself established and then he sent for your mother?

**Lagiss:** Right, and she came to Los Angeles and then he went and got her. And they got married and then they moved up. My godfather and father built three different homes. My godfather was pretty handy and they – the first little house and then they built one where my godfather had a room and then he rented- just about a block away and then they built our own- the house in Port Chicago.

**I:** Did your godfather ever marry?

**Lagiss:** No, he never did get married.

**I:** So he was always close to your family then?

**Lagiss:** Yes, and he was heavy ouzo drinker and as a matter of fact, he died rather young. He was a heavy drinker- I never saw him drunk but he always –

**I:** What was his name?

**Lagiss:** His name was Jim and they named me after him.

**I:** Oh, and what was his last name?

**Lagiss:** Yeah, he was very-

**I:** What was his last name?

**Lagiss:** Kalajoss.

**I:** Kalajoss?

**Lagiss:** Kalajoss.

**I:** OK, and did he die when you were young?

**Lagiss:** Yes, well, I was in high school when he passed away, but that three or four packs a day eventually got him.

**I:** Cigarettes?

**Lagiss:** Yes.

**I:** Plus cigarettes plus ouzo, right?

**Lagiss:** Oh yeah. In those days I guess the cigarettes were a lot stronger.

**I:** Smoked four packs of cigarettes a day?

**Lagiss:** Oh golly. And so anyway, but they were very handy. The home that we had and the second big home with the big bedrooms and everything they built, they drilled their own well and found water. And my father was a diviner where they took a branch from a – a grape branch – and it's kind of "V" shaped. And he would hold the ends and he would walk very slowly and the end of the branch that was the single point would point down, and then that's where the water was. And he never failed; everybody called him – they called him Gus. And they called my father, all the neighbors: the Italian people, several Swedish people, and he would go to their lots and he would find the water and he'd say to them, "Here". And he'd never miss.

**I:** Did he charge them for that?

**Lagiss:** No. Everybody was close and friendly. Everybody was poor. And then, a lumber mill started up and the lumber came from Oregon and Washington, Coos Bay, Oregon. And they brought the huge logs from the trees: pine. And they started this big lumber mill and my father, my godfather both started as laborers. And then pretty soon, my father went up the line and he became a grader. And a grader was a man who stood next to a belt and the wood: let's say there's one by one by eight twenty foot long where they used to make siding to build the wood homes in those days. And he would turn, look at that board coming, he would flip it over with his right hand, long board—two by sixes, two by eights—and he became very muscular doing that all day long. And he would put an "X" or a "0" and I think there was a dash; it was the various grades and as it got to the end, they piled them on little tracks, on little flat things with wheels on the bottom and then they would go and they put them in the yard. And they would start at the bottom with, say, a big, say a, ten by ten, two of them and then they put the boards on top of that and then they'd cross so air would come in between. And that way, the lumber would dry and when it got to a certain point, why, then they sold it to the people to make their own homes.

**I:** Did your dad work there all his life?

**Lagiss:** All his life, right to the end when the mill shut down. Then he went to work over at the naval base where all the naval Quonset huts in the ground where all the ammunition since World War II from Japan and all the ammunition that was built all over the United States came to the Concord Naval station and if you drive on that road to Pittsburgh from Martinez, you'll see all concrete- all over the hills. And those all filled with ammunition and case of another war.

**I:** And he worked there at the-

**Lagiss:** He worked there for quite some time and he went up the line. He was making good money and even though he was a laborer. And then they gave him a job which was above the laboring class, and he would- was at a warehouse. And people would come and ask for a pump or a brass valve or something and he would throw them on the truck and then they'd go off. Well, one day as he was loading one of the trucks, the man released the breaks and crushed my father up against the loading dock and they rushed him to the naval hospital in Vallejo and three nights later he passed away.

**I:** How old was he?

**Lagiss:** My father at that point was in his mid-fifties.

**I:** Oh, he was young then.

**Lagiss:** Oh yes and it was a terrible blow. I couldn't believe- I was married then to Virginia- we were living in Pittsburgh where I had a sporting goods store there- and I- it was so hard to think that he was gone.

**I:** I can imagine. Now your mother, what did she do? She was at the home- she worked at home.

**Lagiss:** Yes. She lived there, stayed there for quite a few years.

**I:** In the house that your father and your godfather built.

**Lagiss:** That's right and she stayed there. I have to tell you a little story about my mother. She was the one that did raise the chickens, she drove a Model T Ford and we would drive from Port Chicago – about four miles- to a Portuguese family that had dairy cows. And for one dollar, she would get a gallon of milk and it was fresh milk. She'd wait right there and usually she'd get two gallons and then bring it home and that's when we were growing up, we had fresh milk – it wasn't pasteurized but nothing happened in those days. We all grew up.

**I:** How many were in your family?

**Lagiss:** Five of us.

**I:** Five brothers and sisters?

**Lagiss:** We had two sisters and the three boys.

**I:** And how many are still living?

**Lagiss:** My brother, Tony, next to me is still living, and Tina, the baby, is married and lives in Incline Village. Just three out of the original family.

**I:** And your brother Tony is the one who lives in Lafayette?

**Lagiss:** Lafayette, yes.

**I:** Now did your mom- did she learn to speak English?

**Lagiss:** Very well- she went down too and got her citizenship papers and we tried to help her. She could speak fairly decent English – she understood it and she studied, you know, the basics of our country and she went before the judge and the judge asked her name and asked her how she feels about America and she told the judge that it was better than any country in the world. She'd only been in Greece and she loved America. So the judge says, "Mrs. Lagiss, you are a citizen now of the United States". *<laughs>* That was it.

**I:** What was her name?

**Lagiss:** Patricia. Panagiota.

**I:** And what was her maiden name before she got married?

**Lagiss:** Psaras.

**I:** Psaras. And so she came and made her life here in the United States and learned how-and how old was she when she learned how to drive a car?

**Lagiss:** Oh, my mom was in her mid-thirties. She drove that Model T Ford and she had a great feel for wild birds – for – she liked the chickens and everything. And I can tell you a story: my brother and I were hunting one time – just kids – and we came across a nest by a dove. And there were two little baby doves with no feathers and we took the nest and brought it to giagia. And we said, “Mama, we found this little nest with these two little birds.” And she said, “*Παιδάκια μου καλά κάνατε που τα ήφερες* <‘My good birdies that you brought’ {183}>.” So she raised the baby doves and the way she raised them – we had a big screened-in porch which was about 35-40 feet long and about 15 feet wide and it was all screened. And she took the baby doves and she put that baby scratch feed for the chickens – baby chicks – on her lips and she’d hold the baby doves and the doves would eat the feed from her lips and they grew up until they were full-sized birds and they started flying back and forth on the inside. So giagia said, “I’m going to turn the doves loose.” And they were so tamed we could pet them. So we said, “No mama *θα φύγουνε* <‘they’ll leave’ {191}>” – you know, they’re going to fly away. So she opened the door and she walked out, she was holding them, she turned them loose. And she stood there and watched them and I’ll show you the picture that I have: the doves flew around and around and one came and landed on her right shoulder and the other came and landed on her left shoulder and that was their mama. And she did that three or four times and then they came back in the house, stayed in the cage on the porch and about the fifth or sixth time – I don’t remember – but then they flew off and we never saw them. Oh, we were hurt.

**I:** How old was your mother when she died?

**Lagiss:** My mother was in her early eighties.

**I:** She lived a long time.

**Lagiss:** Yes, she did.

**I:** Was there a big difference in age between your mother and father?

**Lagiss:** No, they were very close. My dad had died early. I think she cried; as I recall, for a couple or three years we’d set up the table, and we’d see the tears. And slowly she became accustomed to the fact that he was no longer there. And she kind of – then the children, and the grandchildren and–

**I:** Did she always wear black?

**Lagiss:** Pardon?

**I:** Did she always wear black?

**Lagiss:** Yes.

**I:** All her life after that?

**Lagiss:** Yeah. Right towards the end, I think Virginia talked to her and she kind of changed and then she wore, you know, the regular dresses. But you know, all the Greeks, giagia always wore black for the rest of her life but she changed.

**I:** So she was a widow for almost thirty years.

**Lagiss:** That's right.

**I:** Now what did you do for going to church when you were all young?

**Lagiss:** Well, we used to go, get on the Model T Ford, and drive to Oakland and get on the ferry boat and drive over to the church in Valencia. And we went there Easter – the evening before Easter – and maybe three or four times during the year. And that Easter was always a bear for us because we took our communion and you didn't eat meat – it was very difficult then. And my mother was very strict: we couldn't eat meat, you couldn't drink milk – you know, it was kind of tough and we always got sick riding in that Model T over the top of the hump and down in to get on the ferry boat to go to San Francisco.

**I:** There was no tunnel then.

**Lagiss:** Yeah, that's right. You had to go over the top of the hill and we'd always be sick. So anyway, then, we would drive all the way back after midnight. How they did it, I'll never know.

**I:** Well, they didn't stay in San Francisco, you went home-

**Lagiss:** No, they drove back and we were so tired and then my dad, God bless him, he'd only have a couple, three hours sleep and they started early in the morning. And they'd have the lambs ready – we always had two lambs – two spits and they started the fire real early in the morning. We didn't have briquettes in those days but they had hard wood – they went and found oak and then there was a lot of coals and in those days, you didn't have the electric spits like they do in our place. My brother Nick built a beautiful electric spit and he just turned on the switch and it turned at whatever speed he wanted. But we hated that, to sit there and turn the crank, you know.

**I:** Your mother, was she a good cook?

**Lagiss:** My mother was a fantastic cook – she was very, very good. She always – we had a lot of *λαχανικά* <“veggies” {232}> in those days.

**I:** Did she go and gather them herself?

**Lagiss:** Pardon?

**I:** Did she go and gather them herself?

**Lagiss:** We had a big yard. We grew potatoes, we grew corn, we grew lettuce, believe it or not. Spinach, I mean all of the, you know, all the vegetables that we'd buy in the market today: beets, onions, garlic. Our own garlic was fabulous.

**I:** And your mother was in charge of all that? The gardening?

**Lagiss:** Oh, yeah, but we had to do the watering and pull all the weeds out.

**I:** Now you had other Greek families there?

**Lagiss:** Yes, there were three or four other Greek families and every Friday night they always went to someone else's house. And Friday night, all the families got together. The kids would go in another room and we would, I don't remember, we'd play, holler, and raise Cain. And the elderly men and the women would sit in the kitchen and there'd be pitchers of wine. I recall when they came to our house, about every 30 minutes, I ran down the basement and filled the pitcher with wine. Now, the ladies always had walnuts, almonds, uh, some cheese. My mom made our own feta cheese and very, very good. Put the milk in a cloth sack and all the water would run out and the weight would remain. And she made wonderful feta cheese. And so anyway-

**I:** So it was their menu: the nuts and the cheese.

**Lagiss:** Oh yes, we had cheese, I think, with every lunch, every evening. We always had feta cheese. And, uh, so, uh, and then, they made a candy out out the grape, fresh grape juice. And I don't remember, Peter, how they made it. It was kind of a gelatin thing. And it was very, very tasty.

**I:** It's that moustalevria, right?

**Lagiss:** Yeah, that's right. That's right.

**I:** Did you like that?

**Lagiss:** Oh, it was terrific. We were so poor that anything special like that was just-

**I:** But you didn't have any sense of being poor, did you?

**Lagiss:** No, no, because everybody else was in the same boat. We would go down to the lumber yard and we'd go out and we'd have a throw line – just a line with an old sinker and a couple of hooks. And we would go get worms, uh, and later on, when we made a little money delivering paper, there was a little bait shop and we'd go down and buy three or four sardines for 25 cents and we would get that and throw it at the dock, where the big ship came from Oregon. And we'd throw out and catch striped bass. And the striped bass is a delicious fish – there was no limit in those days and we kept anything that was say, twelve inches or sometimes we'd catch them five, six, seven pounds and we loved to see the big lumber ship come from Oregon. We delivered papers, and so whenever the ships came in, we would go there, and we would deliver the papers.

**I:** So you gave papers to the people on the ship?

**Lagiss:** On the ship.

**I:** The crew.

**Lagiss:** We'd have a little hand cart that we'd pull all the papers and we'd go upstairs. Well, we loved that, when the ship came in. There was a lot of Greek ships – all Greek crew. And, I can remember the captain, when we told them “Είμαστε Έλληνες <‘we’re fishermen’ {275}>” and “Φαγετε, παιδάκια μου? ” “‘Oxi. ” “Παρακαλώ.” <“Did you kids eat? No. All right.” {276}>, he’d say. We’d go upstairs and those Greeks hams and eggs and bacon and eggs and potatoes – that was just the greatest thing for us although we were never hungry at home, but it was so different, you know, to do that. Anyway-

**I:** Most of the people in that town were working people, then – Port Chicago.

**Lagiss:** Oh yes. Now those fellows would bring Oregon crabs in hundred pound sacks, Peter. And they had them on board ship because the crew, you know. Well, once they found out we were Greek, I told my father and my father came down and invited them up to the house. From then on, you know, they had dinner at home and the captain and the three crew guys were four – and by golly, from then on, when they came from Oregon, they would come with feta cheese, butter – you know, we made our own butter, Peter, at home and they brought meat – and oh man, it was a big party every year. So anyway, the mill finally shut down – they didn’t find it profitable and they shut it down and my father went to work at the navy base and my godfather died shortly afterwards.

**I:** And your dad died-

**Lagiss:** Yeah, and my dad died too.

**I:** So now you went to high school in-

**Lagiss:** Concord. Mt. Diablo High School.

**I:** And then what happened in your life?

**Lagiss:** I graduated from high school and I really didn’t have anything particular in mind – I went to University of California and took evening classes.

**I:** At Berkeley?

**Lagiss:** In Berkeley. In sales-

**I:** What did you do in the daytime?

**Lagiss:** Uh, in the daytime, I worked and I had various jobs and then I got a decent job at Shell Chemical Company out of Pittsburgh.

**I:** Now this is before the Second World War.

**Lagiss:** Yes. I was sixteen years old at that time.

**I:** So it was still hard to get work.

**Lagiss:** Yes, but I got a job as an office boy. And I went around with the mail and so forth and I went right up the line. I – the bosses liked me, and I got a job in the warehouse. And I – the people would come to the warehouse – all the contractors – and they wanted valves for pipe, and pipe, and steel sheets, and bolts, and nuts, and – anything in hardware we had there. And from an office boy, I got that job and boy, I went right up the line and I started making \$125, \$140 a month, which, in those days, was quite good.

**I:** You still lived at home?

**Lagiss:** At that point, yes. And then-

**I:** How are you in the family? Which are you – oldest or middle or -

**Lagiss:** No, my older brother was Chris, I was second. And then my brother, Tony, who's still alive and lives over in the Walnut Creek area and my sister, Tina. Pauline after Tony and then Tina was the youngest. And she's up in Incline Village, married to an Italian boy who was our neighbor in Port Chicago and they got two nice children.

**I:** Well he was successful for them to move there, then, in his work.

**Lagiss:** Pardon?

**I:** He did alright in his life for them to move to Incline Village to live.

**Lagiss:** Well, he learned the construction work and he and his brother and they started building warehouses where people go rent the spaces to store their stuff. And he bought quite a bit of property and he was a carpenter. He built two and three story places and he's rented them all out and he has a beautiful home right on the golf course and so they have-

**I:** -a comfortable life.

**Lagiss:** Very, very comfortable.

**I:** So then you were working at the Shell and you had become – you were still taking the courses at UC Berkeley?

**Lagiss:** Yes, and then I left and I – we moved from there – from Pittsburgh to Campbell-

**I:** Who did?

**Lagiss:** Virginia and I-

**I:** OK, but you haven't gotten to that – we haven't gotten that far yet. Let's take a step back.

**Lagiss:** OK, I met Virginia – she was a school teacher-

**I:** And this is while you were working at Shell?

**Lagiss:** Shell. Shell. And I met her – I had met her at my uncle's wedding. And I had a girlfriend and we drove up to this soda fountain and I looked in there and I told my

girlfriend – she was just a nice gal that I had met and we had just took a ride in a Model T Ford and I said, “I know that girl. She was in my uncle’s wedding.” And I got out and went in and I said, “I’ll be right back.” Well, when I finally got back, she had met some other guy and left. So anyway, she remembered me and so she was a school teacher-

**I:** This was before the war.

**Lagiss:** Yes, so anyway, I said, “What do you do?” Well, she liked to play tennis, you know, she’s won a lot of collegiate tennis championships so I had never played tennis in my life and I said well, I wanted to *<laughs>* feel – you know, get friendly with her, so I said, “Well, I can play with you”. Never held a racket in my life and she served the ball and I hit the ball over the fence and she started to laugh, she realized, you know. So anyway, it was good. So, I went up a couple of times and I think we went to the theatre once and-

**I:** And she lived in San Francisco?

**Lagiss:** No, she lived there in Pittsburgh because she was the-

**I:** That’s where she was teaching school.

**Lagiss:** Teaching school. So I said, “I’d like to have you and your lady friend” (they lived together and Navar– she was a teacher) and “come and meet my folks”. So I told my dad and my mom that this sweet girl, they had never met her before and so anyway, they came down and they knocked on the door in Port Chicago. Her girlfriend had a car, knocked on the door and my mother opened the door and Navar’s very dark-haired and Virginia, the blonde and my mother started talking to Navar in Greek. And so Virginia then told her she was the Greek girl. “*O, ἐλα παιδάκια μου*<‘Oh, come my children’{356}>” so we went in and-

**I:** Did they hit it off together right away?

**Lagiss:** Right away and my dad thought she was great and of course, I thought she was great too. So she met the folks and everybody loved her – the whole family and then we were married-

**I:** But you had to go and meet her parents, didn’t you?

**Lagiss:** Yes, I went and married- uh, met her parents. Her dad was a nice man, her mom was. They both liked me.

**I:** So you were fortunate; everybody liked each other.

**Lagiss:** Yes. Very much so. And that was pretty nice so anyway, we got married-

**I:** And what year was that?

**Lagiss:** Uh, we got married just before the war. 1940, ’41. And so anyway-

**I:** So you just had your what – your sixtieth wedding anniversary?

**Lagiss:** Yes.

**I:** So '41 you got married.

**Lagiss:** Yes, that's right. So at any rate, we got married and then there was a – I started a little sporting goods store in Pittsburgh. And, which was quite successful.

**I:** Now when you got out of the war, did you go in the army?

**Lagiss:** Yes. And then I got-

**I:** What happened during the- your army experience – where were you sent?

**Lagiss:** Then I shut- I sold the store and went into the army.

**I:** Oh, you opened the little store first and then went in the army.

**Lagiss:** Right. And so- then when I got out, a lot of salesmen who used to call on me, and I went to work for a wholesale house. And called – I went from Campbell—we moved to Campbell—from Campbell-

**I:** After the war then.

**Lagiss:** Yeah, all the way to Santa Maria. And I had that territory.

**I:** Why did you move to Campbell? Because that was where your territory was?

**Lagiss:** Yeah, that started from San Jose south. And we built a nice little home there. And, well the home was built and I bought it and I added – there was huge garage- I made it bigger and I made it a big playroom and then I went from there to Santa Maria, Santa Barbara and back.

**I:** What kind of sporting goods did you sell?

**Lagiss:** I sold everything. Fishing tackle, hunting equipment, hunting clothes, tennis, baseball – everything.

**I:** That was something you liked- you were an outdoors person anyway-

**Lagiss:** That's right – I knew what it was all about and I was very, very successful. Everything was commission. When I went to work for them, the first thing I asked, I said, "How do you pay?" They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Is it the salary or commission?" So the owner of the company's name was Mr. Seeby – he was a very thin, little Jewish fellow. He says, "We pay commission." I says, "I'm interested." And, uh, he said, "Why do you say that?" I said, "Because the harder I work, the more I make," and I says, "Salary's no good." And he said, "I agree." And I went right up the line and built that territory up and uh, one day he called me in and he said, "I want you to come in as sales manager." So, I said, "OK" and he made a lot of promises, which he didn't keep and I knew a lot of dealers and there was a great big store in San Mateo – Darcy's Sport Shop – huge place and they – a very, very nice store. And I heard it was for sale, and I went to talk to them and I bought it.

**I:** What year was that?

**Lagiss:** That was, that was, after the war. About 4 years, I think, after the war.

**I:** So about 1948, '49?

**Lagiss:** Something like that, yeah. And I was there for three years.

**I:** You owned that store.

**Lagiss:** I owned the store. Bought it lock, stock and barrel.

**I:** And you didn't have partners, just you.

**Lagiss:** I had two partners and I bought them out. They didn't know up from down about fishing tackle or hunting equipment.

**I:** It was the three of them together and then you bought-

**Lagiss:** Yes, I bought the other two guys out and I imported very expensive shot guns from England: Purdy, and Holland and Holland. In those days, I sold them for \$3,000 each-

**I:** In 1949, '50?

**Lagiss:** Yes. And today they're \$50,000 straight across.

**I:** Now at- at that store, did they used to sell that kind of expensive-

**Lagiss:** Yes, because Randy Hearst was in my store every single day. All of the very wealthy people – the guy that owned the Hibernia Bank and everything. One of the nice things I did there, I always felt that the Greek philotimo was the best advertising in the world. And we had a little room that we kept kind of a little storehouse with the short steps about 5 steps right in back of the office. And you went up and there was this thing. And I cleaned it all out and I had those very expensive shotguns from England, \$3,000 in those days was a lot of money and I built – had the carpenters build me a nice rack. I bought a brand new sofa, I had a little bar – fixed up a bar, ran a pipe up at the water. I had cleaned it all up, put a nice drapes – there was some windows – put nice drapes. So, when these very wealthy people would come in in the evenings, they all learned all of the sudden that, go there about 5:30, quarter to six and Jim closes at six, we always have a drink. Well, show you what kind of people we had there, after I fixed this all up, and then Randy Hearst would bring his wealthy friends. The gentleman who owned Hibernia Bank, he'd bring his friends, a couple of the supervisors in those days bring their friends in and they'd come in and bought. You know, they bought their shotgun shells, boots, everything. And then, I shut the store down at 6 o'clock and we'd all go up and have a couple of drinks. Nobody abused it. One or two drinks, everybody would thank me and pretty soon, Peter, to show you what nice people, Randy Hearst says, "You know, Jim, this isn't fair you know, we come up here and drink your booze." So he contacted all the rest of the guys and the next thing you know, I must have had four cases of very high-class whiskey. They all brought their own whiskey and of course, everybody drank – they loved it and now right down- three doors down was a real nice little restaurant an Italian guy had. And then I had mezzathakia.

**I:** Oh, so you served that too!

**Lagiss:** Hot hors d'oeuvres. Sometimes it was little sausages, sometimes it was little pieces of meat he had barbecued – all various. And, Peter, the bar across the street was- it was empty! Of course it was a restaurant and a bar called The Shadows – they made some fancy soups. He used to come over – he'd come over and have drinks too. But everybody loved it and my business just grew and grew.

**I:** So it prospered right from the very beginning.

**Lagiss:** Yes, it was very profitable but it became much more so because the old Greek philotimo Peter, you can't – there's no place in the world that has the type of philotimo and I'm proud to tell people I'm of Greek descent. And it never fails. When people come here to our home, I've had a lot of them here for the first time and they would leave and say, "You people are very generous and very fine." And it pays off. You know, if you're in business and you have that philotimo you've got the greatest advertising in the world, you know.

**I:** Did you have much to do with the Greek community while you were grown up – after you came here?

**Lagiss:** Yes.

**I:** So you lived in Campbell, then, when you had this business in San Mateo?

**Lagiss:** We came up here and I was one of the first people that had put up the money to build the church where we're at right now. Seven of us put up our homes. Yes, for the loan.

**I:** Was it this house that we're in right now?

**Lagiss:** Pardon?

**I:** This house that we're in now?

**Lagiss:** That's right. And I went down to the bank and they- it was an Italian guy that I did business with and we made the first loan and I said, "Look", I said, "There's enough people, we've come in signing, an Italian guy, a good guy and he said, "Jim, we never foreclose on churches." I said, "Wonderful, Louie, I'll never forget." So, by golly, we borrowed the money –

**I:** Who were the others, do you remember?

**Lagiss:** There was eight of us.

**I:** Who were they?

**Lagiss:** I don't remember all their names. Every now and then, at one of the big affairs, dinner affairs that they have there, the priest asked for the seven of us and we all – I think now there's only five of us and we all stand up and everybody-

**I:** Peter Angelides, was he one of them?

**Lagiss:** Peter Angelides was one of them uh, I can't think of who the other guys were-

**I:** So you all put your money down.

**Lagiss:** Yes.

**I:** And you guaranteed the loan with your property-

**Lagiss:** Yes, that's right.

**I:** And it was paid off.

**Lagiss:** Paid off, that's right.

**I:** So, uh, but then, also, what's curious to me is that as your business prospered, you got to sell an even more variety of shot guns and-

**Lagiss:** That's right. Well, then I- I had these partners in LA and I was doing most of the business and I broke away and I said, "It's all over with. You guys are not helping out." So I phoned the factories.

**I:** Did you continue to have the store yourself, then?

**Lagiss:** No, I was factory representative. I had the 13 western states, Peter.

**I:** For what?

**Lagiss:** For all my lines – I had Marlon guns, I had Black Sheep hunting clothing and hunting wear, I had Fioki shotguns shells – I had all – the complete line.

**I:** And you didn't have that store anymore in San Mateo.

**Lagiss:** No, I had sold the store a long time- I was a factory rep for many years and then I had these partners. But I did all the business. So one of the – the first partner died and then I had this guy in LA and he wasn't doing anything. He didn't know beans about hunting or fishing and so I said, "Jim", his name was Jim Devere, very dishonest guy, I caught him on a lot of things, and I told him, "Look, no more partnership," I said, "I'm through," and I says, "I'm gonna go after the lines." He said, "That's fine with me." And I said, "OK". Picked up the phone, I called Marlon, I said, "Look, I'm just breaking up," I said, "This guy Devere hasn't done a damn thing, he doesn't know anything about hunting and we've broken up – I'd like to have the line." The president of the company – I was the first rep that they had. He says, "The line is yours." That was my start and then, the hunting clothing - #2 big, big line – 13 western states. And then Fioki, and on, and on, and on. And of all of the 12 lines, he got one line that didn't pay anything.

**I:** You got the other 11.

**Lagiss:** I got the 11. And then I hired Owen Brown, who came with me, didn't have – he was a salesman for a big wholesale house. And hired on and he didn't have money to buy a car.

We went and bought a used car – my brother, Nick, helped, god bless him. And we went and bought a used car – got him started. And he was a loyal, good guy and when I retired, I gave him the company. And now he's a very wealthy guy; he's doing very well.

**I:** So he does the same thing that you did then – he was a sales representative-

**Lagiss:** That's right. All those guys working the same- half of them are gone, some of the old timers are still there doing very, very well. As a matter of fact, he called me up here earlier this year, he says, "I want you to be my guest on this ranch that I lease. I want you to come down and go on a hunt." I said, "Wonderful." So I went.

**I:** Where was the ranch?

**Lagiss:** Right at the top of the Tahone Pass as you get to the top. The Tahone Ranch is 175,000 acres, and it's owned by a conglomerate, and they have hunting trips, and they have a lot of other things. So I went down as his guest and shot a wild pig, have a beautiful club house, showers, private rooms, and so they use it as a, the land company, as a kind of a holiday thing for their big customers.

**I:** So you- your business until you retired, then-

**Lagiss:** I retired and then I started my import business and I imported-

**I:** OK, so how old were you when you retired?

**Lagiss:** From then – I was about 62 or 3.

**I:** And that's when you sold to, Brian, right?

**Lagiss:** And then I gave it to Owen-

**I:** Owen, right-

**Lagiss:** and then I started-

## Side B

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**I:** We're going to continue with side two of the tape. Jim was just telling us as we completed side one about after he had sold his territory, or gave his territory to Owen, that then he went into the importing business and imported and sold specialized rifles-

**Lagiss:** Shotguns-

**I:** Shotguns. So let's go on from there. How did you- you already had these contacts from your business, correct?

**Lagiss:** Yes, because I went to Spain a lot and met a lot of people there and they didn't have anybody out here. They called me and I said- I went and flew back east and met them and I got the line and- One of the big lines that helped me tremendously was Zeiss

Optical and they didn't have any business in the United States. I knew they had quality. And so they heard about my company and they invited me to go back to New York to look at their stuff and I looked at it and I said, "It's not going to sell in the type of equipment that you have right now." And they said, "Well, what you suggest?" I said, "You have to make scopes – your binoculars are perfect but the rifle scopes will not go in this country." And they said, "OK, fine. You tell us what you need." And I flew back to Chicago four or five times, my own expense and I bought various samples and I got their attention and they said, "We will make you a set of prototypes," which they did. And by golly, they turned out to be very good. Stoger Arms was bringing them in and they were very gracious, good people. The business just boomed and they were kind enough to invite me to go to Spain with fifteen sports riders and we went up on one of these great big jets upstairs where they have one big area and all of the gun riders, sports riders were there, including myself. And there was two waitresses that did nothing but make drinks- and everybody drank and we had a wonderful time-

**I:** And you went to Spain.

**Lagiss:** And we went to-

**I:** The factory.

**Lagiss:** Went went, actually, to Germany first-

**I:** For Zeiss-

**Lagiss:** For Zeiss and we took a tour down the Rhine River and they- it was a wonderful tour. They had stopped- the wine is horrible in Germany-

**I:** You don't like it too much-

**Lagiss:** Oh no, not very good at all. And we stopped at all these cities and took tours and everything and the final day, we went to the plant. Now their big business, Zeiss, is not binoculars and it's not rifle scopes. Their big business is lunar scopes – it takes ten years to make the lens on one of those lunar scopes. And the lens weighs about four tons and it's about five or six feet thick and they have to heat that glass 'til it's a certain temperature – white hot and then let it cool. And they have to do that for about five years 'til all the little bubbles that are in the glass are gone. Then, they take it and they cut it and they make the lenses and they make- and the lunar scope everyone that they make is thirty to forty million dollars. So Zeiss – and then, their other big business in the optics is medical. And they perform – I went and sat in at this little theatre that holds about forty people – very steep and you're looking right down on the stage. They perform an eye operation and it's all completed – closed in with glass- hermetically sealed and so it has the proper air where no germs or anything- and they have a movie camera that they can see exactly what's transpiring and it showed on the screen.

**I:** So you can watch the operation-

**Lagiss:** It's unbelievable, Peter. I couldn't believe my eyes and, but that's their big business. But being in the optic business, then they got into the binocular business and scope business and their binoculars have always been excellent. But their scopes were big and clumsy. And I went to Chicago four, five times like I told you and they were very

gracious and they invited me back along with the sports riders. And the last day we were there, the chairman of the board said, "Jim, you stand up." And I stood up and told the story how I did so much to help them to get into the American market-

**I:** To redesign the scopes-

**Lagiss:** Redesign their scopes and he wanted to make a present and I have the riffle, which I will show you and on the scope – it's a number 11 scope, and my name, "Jim". And he made the presentation and then he – I went to Spain and went on a hunting trip – all expenses paid including airfare back. So they were very gracious-

**I:** They certainly were. And then you sold- then you were also importing the shotguns from Spain.

**Lagiss:** Spain. And that I had been doing for sometime. I had the shotguns-

**I:** Now why are better than other country's shotguns?

**Lagiss:** Well, they make- English shotguns are all 50,000 each. The Arrieta sidelock shotgun, double barrel – side by side – is every bit as good and about 3 to 4 to 7,000 dollars. I took on a partner, Reed's Sportshop, down in San Jose and he hires 50-60-70 dollar a week people and they cannot sell 5-4-5-6,000 dollar shotguns. And so I ran the ads in this national magazine and did all the sales out of my house and that's been going on now for four years and here last month, I called up Earl, we had a meeting, I said, "Earl", I said, "All of the business I have gotten, you accidentally sell a couple shotguns a year down here," and I said, "I want the partnership to end," and I said, "I have a quite a bit of money coming." He said, "That's fine." He said, "I agree with you." And so we got our lawyer and next month we're going down and all these years, all the guns that were sold, he owes me my share, which-

**I:** So he's going to pay you.

**Lagiss:** He's going to pay me.

**I:** And are you going to continue to sell those guns?

**Lagiss:** No, I'm all through with the gun business. I have been – he's been selling them down there – I was the silent partner. But you see, he hires 50-60-70 dollar a week salesmen – how is that poor guy gonna sell a 3 or 4,000 dollar shotgun – he's probably never seen one.

**I:** Never fired it, never done anything-

**Lagiss:** Done anything. And even though you go down and I help try to tell him how, and they all the shotguns that have been sold, 90%, I run these ads nationally and I sell them and then he ships the guns.

**I:** Now you also were imported guns from Italy?

**Lagiss:** Italy – that was many years ago and the Italians were very good people. I was also Franchi – I sold a lot of Franchi guns and helped them get started out here and they were

bought out by Berretta. And eventually, I gave up. Italians are difficult people to do business with. They're very, very tough. They don't like to put anything down on writing. The Spaniards are very honorable people and I'm not saying all the Italians are that way but the ones – the smaller ones that I did business with didn't pay off.

**I:** So now you reflect you had a very successful business career and-

**Lagiss:** Always in sporting goods and you know, when you do the thing best – the thing that you love most, and there's no question about it and like I will show you a beautiful Marlin rifle – they didn't have any business out here in the west and I took a sample of their guns and went to every dealer all the way to Santa Barbara and I sold guns and forced the wholesalers to put in the Marlin line. And it grew and grew and grew and my name and picture is in the history of Marlin, which is very nice and it shows some of the guns that I had engraved in gold and everything. And they're very good people – they have given me guns and they invite me back and they threw a party for me when I retired in Las Vegas and there were two hundred and fifty people at the party. And they presented me with this gun and very good people – they were very friendly, very nice people. And matter of fact, I got a call from the president, wanted to know if I was going to the shot show with Virginia and he wants us to come to dinner with him, which I thought was quite nice.

**I:** I wanted to just pause for a moment and say that the room that we're conducting the interview in is completely covered on all the walls, all the way around the room, are trophies – animals that presumably you shot yourself. Is that right?

**Lagiss:** Every single one. You don't put up anything on the wall that you haven't shot.

**I:** Which are your favorites? Which are the most interesting? Pick two or three only – you can't talk about all of them.

**Lagiss:** Well, the toughest are the sheep. You can't drive a jeep to them, you have to climb up on top of the mountains.

**I:** Where did you get those sheep?

**Lagiss:** Alaska, British Columbia – very, very difficult – the mountain goat from Alaska and you start out in the morning, and you climb about 4, 5, 6,000 feet. The leopard comes from Tanzania.

**I:** You shot that in Tanzania?

**Lagiss:** Tanzania. That leopard was shot about 100 yards from a school where children were walking and apparently, somebody saw the leopard and they came to our camp. We happened to be camped about a mile away and the guides went over and saw his tracks and they realized he was after some of the children. So they – we went and shot an animal and they hung it in the tree and the leopard will not eat fresh meat. They wait 'til it ages and then they'll start eating it. And then when he started eating it, they built a blind about a hundred yards away and it was all brush and trees with a little round area for my rifle. And we get there at dark, and by golly, we had those two little goats – a dollar a piece I paid, and they tied them to the base of the tree and they were crying and attracted him. And then when I got to, just light enough and then I shot him.

**I:** When we were on a photo safari in Africa last year, the leopards were the only animals that we didn't see because they're the most difficult to find.

**Lagiss:** That's right. Lions – I have pictures of lions right next to the jeep, sitting right there looking at you. I'll show you someday-

**I:** The leopards are nocturnal-

**Lagiss:** The leopards are very, very cautious. They work a lot at night and they're very powerful animals.

**I:** How many times have you gone hunting in Africa?

**Lagiss:** Oh I've been there seven times.

**I:** Seven times – so you've been most everywhere?

**Lagiss:** Yep. Kenya, South Africa, Southwest Africa, Kenya, Tanzania-

**I:** Was this all part of your work?

**Lagiss:** Yes, well, see, I was selling- I was in the gun business selling guns. And I'd come and I took a lot of slides and I'd go into a dealer's town and I'd show all the slides and they'd have their customers, like San Jose, Gordon's Sportshop and he put on a show and I went down one evening and they had about 150 people there, showed all the slides and everybody thought it was great. And John told me later, he said, "Boy Jim, you can't believe the amount of business that that created." And I did that for quite a few dealers.

**I:** And then would people invite you to go on these safaris?

**Lagiss:** No, safari you have to go after the people – the safari outfitters. And I met one guy over here in the United States and I went with him first in Kenya. Kenya does not have anymore hunting. Tanzania and all the other countries do. Kenya's a very corrupt country – corrupt leadership. The biggest violator of ivory shipments was the president's wife in Kenya. And they were shooting elephants right and left. And they sold the ivory to the Chinese, to various countries, and they found a warehouse with about five million dollars worth of ivory and it was all the king's doings and they arrested them and they got them out of power.

**I:** Now you – so you traveled, but you've gone elsewhere for these hunting expeditions.

**Lagiss:** Well, I went to Kenya, went to South America – South America's all bird shooting- very, very nice people down there. And mostly doves and wild pigeon. And every noontime is a big barbecue and wine out there. Very good people. South Americans are like we are, Peter, they're very friendly, very outgoing – millions and millions of birds. I'll show you some pictures where in a morning shoot, ten of us – we got over 4,000 birds.

**I:** Now, did your wife go with you on these trips?

**Lagiss:** She never did come to South America.

**I:** Did she go to Africa with you?

**Lagiss:** One trip she went to Africa. We went on a – that blue train. That was a very nice trip but she got to see Africa. She went with the girls once too, but never on a hunt.

**I:** Now back to your life away from your business, then, you and Virginia have been married sixty years and you have how many children?

**Lagiss:** Three.

**I:** Three children? And where are they?

**Lagiss:** Well, Patricia's got a big job – she's one of the top people of South San Francisco schools. She handles all the problems and she has own beautiful apartment and she's making very good money. I think now she's up to around 70,000, but she's – she's been there for many, many years.

**I:** And your other daughter?

**Lagiss:** And the other daughter has a giftshop – Barbara – she has a giftshop in Vail, Colorado. Has her own home – very, very nice. And my son is up in Trinidad.

**I:** And his name is Jim, too?

**Lagiss:** Yes.

**I:** Jim Jr., right?

**Lagiss:** Yes. He's an artist. He did all those paintings that you see here on the walls – the pheasant over there and all these other paintings.

**I:** And I understand he also does very large paintings for companies and banks and-

**Lagiss:** Yes, yes. Matter of fact, I have some friends down in Texas and here a few years ago, I got to the airport and I started through the airport, and there was about eight or nine of his paintings on the walls of the airport. But you know, he can do all the beautiful stuff like birds and animals and everything, but he got into this abstract business which doesn't do anything for me, but I can't tell him how to live his life.

**I:** That's right. I want to – one thing that is interesting to me is that you know, you and your wife have had very different kinds of careers. And you've had a career that you've described in some detail and then Virginia's had her own career and her own interests. And but it's my sense that you have been very supportive of her in terms of her activities.

**Lagiss:** Oh absolutely. She's been supportive. She's a very fine shooter. She was the first – we had this big ranch that we-

**I:** She taught you how to play tennis and you taught her how to shoot a gun.

**Lagiss:** And we go down there and I'll have to show you some pictures of her with all these birds. And she was the first to get her limit of ten doves and every- she was right by a little water tank and the owner of the ranch and the rest of us, he said, "Nobody gets close to Virginia." And she killed just ten birds and that's the limit, but you know all the guys kept shooting and she would take her ten birds and go in in the morning. Very fine trap and skeet shooter. And so is Pat —she's a very fine shooter. Very good shooter. Jimmy, of course, he learned, he killed his deer and I took him to Africa and I took him up to Canada hunting. And so he lives up in Trinidad.

**I:** Now, I want to ask you sorta as we wrap this up, people are always asked about what their sense of being Greek is. Greek American. And if in — in fact, do you have any sense that you ever encountered any kind of prejudice against yourself because of being Greek?

**Lagiss:** None whatsoever. Matter of fact, I got a lot of very good friends that I shoot with that I know, business acquaintances, "Here comes the Greek!" And you, they're all kidding, but a nice way. Matter of fact, a lot of my good friends have said, "You know, the Greek people were way ahead of their time." And I said, "That's right. You read some history. Take a look at the dictionary —see what words — where they come from." So they understand, the intelligent ones do and you know, matter of fact, some friends that I got that I shoot with, "Look out, here comes the Greek."

**I:** Have you been to Greece many times?

**Lagiss:** Yes, we've been there quite a few times. We have some very good friends in Athens that we stay with and it's — I love it. Athens is nice. Athens has cleaned up their act. We were there here a couple, three years ago and the new subway, Peter, is out of this world. Absolutely- have you been there? Have you seen it?

**I:** I haven't been on the new subway yet. You know, usually we go to the northern part of Greece so I haven't been to Athens in a while.

**Lagiss:** Well, the new trains that go through there — all the walls are marble and about every three or four hundred feet, there's a niche in the wall where they- when they dug up all these ancient artifacts and they have them. It's like a museum. Absolutely unbelievable. And the train is very fast, you know. Greece has come a long way since I first went there, you know. The stores are nicer, they got elegant stores now and- but you know, philotimo from the Greek people is still there. Once they know you're Greek, you know, everything is- they're nice to everybody basically.

**I:** And that in your sense is the sort of the greatest gift you have from being Greek — having developed this sense of philotimo, then.

**Lagiss:** No question. You know, we — all of my friends that have come here and many of them said Virginia immediately said, "Sit down" and she'd bring something to eat or drink and you know, they all say, "You know, the Greek people are really wonderful people." Part of them have told me, "You know, I went to so-and-so's house, was there for four hours, they never even offered a glass of water." And I said, "Well, that's the way they're brought up." And I said, "We were not brought up that way." Anybody who came to our home in Port Chicago as poor as we were, the first thing was a pitcher of wine, raisins, walnuts, almonds — we didn't have money for souvlakia or anything like that. And so,

it's carried on and our whole family is that way, which is wonderful. I think we have something special. You know, I've had guys say, "You know, you're proud to be of Greek descent." And I say, "You better believe it, buddy." I said, "You read history and see what the Greeks started." I said, "Look at the dictionary and see how many word in Greek." No question, Peter. We have a lot to be proud of.

**I:** That's right. Well, I want to thank you very much. I think it has been an interesting talk. Is there anything else you want to add before we stop?

**Lagiss:** Well, you're a nice guy and you're always welcome.

**I:** Well, thank you – I appreciate it. And thank you for your time.

**END OF INTERVIEW**